

## Unit Leadership Program Menu of Solutions Template

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Solution Title: The Forest vs. the Trees: Understanding Preferences for the Big Picture or the Details

Summary: To assist participants in becoming aware of their own and others' preferences for "the forest" (the big picture) or "the trees" (the details).  
 To help participants to understand that both perspectives (the forest and the trees) are valuable in a group and that both may also cause conflict in a group.  
 To help participants to understand what each type of person needs from the other in order to work together.  
 NOTE: This approach can be used with MBTI or any other characteristic on which members differ.

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Competency Link(s):	Primary:	Respect for Others & Diversity Management  Conflict Management
	Secondary:	Team Building  Decision Making & Problem Solving

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Solution Type:	Training	<b>X</b>	Non Training Solution
Cost of Item:	\$0		
Time required to conduct:	80 – 100 minutes		
Resources needed to conduct:	Pfeiffer excerpt attached or something similar Pencils, paper, clipboard for each participant, flip chart and felt-tip markers for each team, masking tape for each team		

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Is this item presented elsewhere in the Coast Guard (LAMS, CPOA, OCS, etc)?

Yes	—	No	<b>X</b>
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*The Pfeiffer Book of*  
**Successful  
Team-Building  
Tools**

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Elaine Biech, Editor

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# THE FOREST VS. THE TREES: UNDERSTANDING PREFERENCES FOR THE BIG PICTURE OR THE DETAILS

*Bonnie Jameson*

## **Goals**

- To assist participants in becoming aware of their own and others' preferences for "the forest" (the big picture) or "the trees" (the details).
- To help participants to understand that both perspectives (the forest and the trees) are valuable in a group and that both may also cause conflict in a group.
- To help participants to understand what each type of person needs from the other in order to work together.

## **Group Size**

Sixteen to thirty-two participants, assembled into a maximum of three "Forest" and three "Trees" teams of four to eight members each. The teams may vary in size, but there should be the same number of teams for each perspective (one Forest team and one Trees team, two Forest teams and two Trees teams, or three Forest teams and three Trees teams).

## **Time Required**

One hour and twenty to forty minutes.

## **Materials**

- A copy of The Forest vs. the Trees Theory Sheet for each participant.
- A copy of The Forest vs. the Trees Team-Selection Sheet for each participant.
- Several sheets of paper and a pencil for each participant.

- A clipboard or other portable writing surface for each participant.
- A flip chart and a felt-tipped marker for each team.
- A roll of masking tape for each team.

### ***Physical Setting***

A room large enough for the teams to work without disturbing one another. Movable chairs must be provided, and plenty of wall space must be available for posting newsprint.

### ***Process***

1. The facilitator introduces the goals of the activity.
2. The facilitator distributes copies of The Forest vs. the Trees Theory Sheet and discusses the content with the participants. (Five minutes.)
3. The facilitator distributes copies of The Forest vs. the Trees Team-Selection Sheet and instructs each participant to select a team—either Forest or Trees—based on the characteristics listed on this sheet. The “Forest” participants are asked to assemble in one end of the room and the “Trees” in the other. (Five minutes.)
4. The facilitator assembles the teams, making sure that there are as many Forest teams as Trees teams. The teams need not have (and probably will not have) the same numbers of members.
5. The participants are given paper, pencils, and clipboards or other portable writing surfaces. The members of each team are instructed to work individually to list what they perceive to be the behaviors of the opposite kind of team. (Forests generate perceptions of the behaviors of Trees; Trees generate perceptions of the behaviors of Forests.) (Five minutes.)
6. The facilitator gives each team a flip chart, a felt-tipped marker, and masking tape. The members of each team are asked to share their perceptions about behaviors while one member records these perceptions on the flip chart. The participants are encouraged to add any new ideas about behaviors that arise during this sharing. (Fifteen minutes.)
7. The facilitator instructs each team to choose a spokesperson to report the team’s data, reassembles the entire group, and asks the spokespersons to take turns reporting. Each team’s flip-chart paper is posted and stays in place so that all participants can see it during the next step. (Five to fifteen minutes; time varies depending on the number of teams reporting.)

8. The facilitator asks the teams to reassemble and to brainstorm what they want and need from the opposite kind of team when they are working together on problem-solving and planning tasks. (Forests generate wants and needs from 'Trees; Trees generate wants and needs from Forests). The facilitator clarifies that each team is to appoint a recorder to write members' ideas on the flip chart. (Ten minutes.)
9. The members of each team are instructed to prioritize their top five wants and needs from the brainstormed list. (Ten minutes.)
10. The facilitator again instructs each team to choose a spokesperson to report the team's data, reassembles the entire group, and asks the spokespersons to take turns reporting. Each team's flip-chart paper is again posted and remains in place during the concluding discussion. (Five to fifteen minutes; time varies depending on the number of teams reporting.)
11. The facilitator leads a total-group discussion based on these questions:
  - What new insights do you have about the Forest perspective? About the Trees perspective?
  - How have the two perspectives and their associated behaviors led to conflict in group meetings that you have attended? How have the two perspectives and their behaviors contributed positively to group meetings?
  - How have your assumptions about the Forest perspective changed? How have your assumptions about the Trees perspective changed?
  - How will you use your new understanding of the two perspectives in future meetings? How can you share your understanding with others? What might you do differently to work better with people whose perspective is the opposite of yours?(Twenty minutes.)

### ***Variations***

- After step 7 the facilitator may encourage the Forest and Trees team members to ask for clarification of any perceptions of behavior that they do not understand.
- This activity may be used with the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* or the Time-Management Personality Profile on page 149 in *The 1995 Annual: Volume 2, Consulting*.
- The process described in this activity may be used for any dimension of the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* or another inventory on time management.

## THE FOREST VS. THE TREES THEORY SHEET

Important issues can be looked at from two separate points of view: the “Forest” (or big-picture) perspective and the “Trees” (or detail) perspective. People with a Forest perspective are concerned with the future; they look at things with a wide-focus lens and generate global scenarios about what might happen. Those with a Trees perspective are concerned with immediate problems: they look at things with a narrow-focus lens and concentrate on specific details. Current research in the field of psychological type suggests that an individual generally has a strong preference for one perspective or the other and that his or her communication patterns are based on that preference.

Organizational leaders need to understand and be comfortable with both perspectives. For example, both perspectives are important in strategic planning. The visioning portion of strategic planning, which involves determining a future-oriented mission, values, and goals, requires the Forest or big-picture perspective. A team of policy makers must answer the global questions “why?” and “what?” in establishing the organization’s purpose and the general means by which it will meet that purpose.

The operational portion of strategic planning, which involves determining the specific outcomes and action plans necessary to achieve the long-range goals, requires the Trees or detail perspective. The policy makers must figure out “what” tasks must be performed, “by when,” and “who” is responsible for each task that contributes to achieving the long-term goals.

However, the Forest and Trees perspectives can clash and often do, leading to miscommunication, misunderstandings, interpersonal conflict, stress, ineffective meetings, and other negative results. It is important to realize that both perspectives are essential to organizational functioning and that neither is inherently superior to the other.

## THE FOREST VS. THE TREES TEAM-SELECTION SHEET

*Instructions:* Please select the Forest perspective or the Trees perspective based on your preference for the characteristics listed below.

Trees Perspective	Forest Perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wants facts and details right away.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Needs to understand the purpose (why something has to happen) before working on a solution.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prefers working on one aspect of a problem at a time.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Needs an overview of the entire problem before discussing details.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prefers not to envision a possible future or scenario of the future.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Needs to see and imagine possible scenarios for the future.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is bored with too much theory or abstraction.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wants theory to be verified.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wants to go directly to the action stage and implementation of a chosen solution.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prefers to envision how the situation will look at its best in the future before developing specific outcomes.</li></ul>